

① First Impressions of Vietnam: December, 1964.

Vietnam Diary

Notes from the journal
of a young American in Saigon

Ronan

12#
Fever pictures, from yesterday's bout with amoebic dysentery; today, in bed, I have the day off, first since I got here.

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12#
—18:30, walking home early from the Embassy (taking the afternoon off, we would say in the Pentagon); electricity is off, on the left side of the street; gas lamps and candles glow in the shops on the Tu Do. "Sorry, Out of Order," says a sign that is usually posted in the elevator window; "Sorry about that," someone has written in the corner of it. "That's the American slogan out here," says Jerry, an American who has joined the Vietnamese. "It got so popular that someone made up bush hats with 'Sorry about that' written around the brim." Funny, it doesn't sound American. "Now, if someone's buddy gets killed, you can't say 'Sorry about that,' because it's a joke," he says.

One-oh-five's

12#
—"What's that?" I ask, first night in Saigon. "105's . . . about 5 kilometers," says the old hand. "What's

Five

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1st Impressions ①


Preface to come?
italo?

to precede (A) head?
or follow?

First Impressions ①

① head - OK?

This is the only title so far to incorporate the date of writing. Since the progression of time is so important to these



pieces, perhaps it would
be best to use an (A1) head,
either before or after the
(A) head, giving the date of
writing. Of course, this will
give the whole book the look
of a journal or diary — perhaps
misleading? So far, though, I think it fits

First Impressions ①

(FN)

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permissions footnote. I
assume this sort of thing
will be necessary.

I don't think it's necessary to →

asterisk the footnote to
the title, but please verify
this with S+S permissions
dept. Title certainly looks
better without an asterisk.

the light on the horizon?" "Flares." Or sometimes, since it is the rainy season: "I think *that's* thunder," or "lightning." Yet the city is not under siege. Most of the artillery firing is unregistered, unobserved. On rooftop restaurants, the steady crump, crump of the firing is very plain, the flares in the distance are pretty—and the food in the restaurants is very good.

9 $\frac{1}{m}$ Hard

~~It~~ to recapture, after three weeks, the trace of foreboding in moving through the streets and the crowds of Saigon, one's first night in Vietnam after a year of cable-reading in Washington. Which of the newsboys, the cyclo drivers, the soup peddlers is an enemy; why is the balloon ~~seller~~ crowding me? (Just recently, an American was asked to hold a long stick of balloons for a moment; they exploded.) Gradually, alertness is dulled; because nothing happens, because people are friendly, because the streets and even some faces become familiar. Yet there are reminders. A policeman hails a passing Vespa, makes the two boys dismount and searches them ("They often stop Vespas with an extra passenger," says my companion. "The boy in back could be ready to throw a grenade"); hidden behind a nearby tree, another policeman covers the first with a sub-machine gun.

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~~that is~~
~~as in other~~
~~countries~~

Heavy cement posts, three feet thick, close the approaches to the Embassy, the Rex (officers' quarters), the Brink (enlisted quarters, blown up, Christmas Eve, 1964); barbed-wire barricades stand behind them, and MP's with shotguns check

and



passes; before a car is let through the runway between the posts, the MP's pass large mirrors on the ends of poles under it, and check the trunk and under the hood. The windows of the Embassy, since the bombing, have been filled in with cement, except for slits of glass block and jutting air conditioners; the triangular front of the building looks like the prow of an armored ship.

12#

Ninety percent

91 — "90% of the men in this town are armed," says a secretary. Some exaggeration, but the incongruous presence of weapons does give this French city the look of a frontier town. "All weapons must be cleared before entering" is a frequent door sign. At the cashier's desk at the entrance to the PX, a modern supermarket, is a jumble of of Swedish "K" submachine guns,

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Thompsons, grease guns, and carbines, dropped by the owners while they shop inside. Sidearms are as varied: .45's, snub-nosed .38's, huge Magnum six-shooters, back-pocket Browning .25-caliber "pistolets," all in a variety of regulation or quick-draw holsters. Leaving the hotel in the early morning, the next man in the elevator may be covered with grenades—fragmentation, concussion, white phosphorus—and a short-stock paratrooper's submachine gun, with extra clips fastened to it with heavy adhesive tape. A jeep is waiting to take him to an operation 15 kilometers out of town; he will come back to the hotel at night.

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—In the paper this morning: a woman is stopped for identification by a policeman; she throws a gre-

nade, kills the policeman and injures several passersby, escapes, firing a pistol, down an alley.

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9 1 m I love

I have never seen any, anywhere in the world, so gay, so friendly, and funny. They all remind me of my own. Again and again, a crowd of kids sees us approaching, on foot or in a car, and explodes into a chant, almost in unison: "Okay! Okay! Hallo! Hallo! Number One!" They rush out with hysterical grins—and I remember my children running out to climb over me at the end of the day, and my heart turns over. In the hamlets, they want to hold your wrist, pluck the hair on your arms; if you try to catch them to lift them up, they dart just out of reach, till a brave one tries it, then they all want to be swung. "Chao anh" (Hello... to a child) brings thrilled looks, giggling consultation. In a village, a provincial capital, or a hamlet, the children follow you around like a cloud of birds; as you walk, talking to someone, little hands slip into yours; another hand may slap you impudently on the butt. "Look at this," says the USOM (AID) Province Rep in Chau Doc, arms full of little girls belonging to his cook and housekeeper. "And they tell you not to get involved."

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Within a week, I know many Americans who are involved. Fanatics, mavericks, losers, non-team-players, fluent speakers of Vietnamese, old Vietnam hands who have

hung on or gotten back (despite the warnings of the "career management" specialists in their bureaucracies) or have found a place on their own that keeps them in Vietnam. They are mostly distrusted or handled with great reserve by their organizations, because they care too much, because they fight the problem, because they are arrogant and contemptuous of the majority of uninvolved, not very highly motivated Americans who necessarily fill the ranks. More and more I come to suspect that these men are essential; that we simply cannot succeed without them. Which means that the system must somehow come to adapt to them, to learn to find them and place them and keep them and bear ~~up to~~ them. The system, as yet, is not geared to do that.

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#—The system tends to suspect that the man who seems to love Vietnam really loves Vietnamese girls. Plausible . . . yet, surprisingly, less truth to it than one would expect. For one thing, these dedicated men are great believers in (1) living out in the provinces, and (2) not getting mixed up with women in the provinces. This makes much of their life quite austere.

"When I tried to extend the second time, you know what the personnel bastard said?" says the Special Forces captain who is in for the night from a western province, where he is running a special training program with the Hoa Hao. "He said, 'I guess you've got a Number 1 shack-up job!'" Great indignation followed by a rhetorical pause. At my look of reserve, suggesting I find this guess less than insulting, his friend elaborates: "Why, we spend two months in the provinces—we

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don't sleep with anybody in the provinces; it's deadly to your effectiveness." "That's a mistake," says Jerry, when I tell him how the fanatics have warned me off *liaisons* with *Vietnamiennes*. "You won't come to understand the Vietnamese that way, and they won't understand you. And do you know what you'd be missing?" (Certainly the bar girls in their white nurses' uniforms are the prettiest whores in the world.)

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I ~~spend~~ most of my off-hours water-skiing," says the beautiful blonde secretary, "up the river at a Special Forces camp." The water in the Saigon River is *not* blue; and, "Aren't the VC on the other side of the river?" "Oh, yes, they shoot at you sometimes . . . but they're terrible shots; in fact, I don't think they're really trying to hit us. Of course, we quit when they start shooting. . . . Once these men on the other side of the river started firing with a machine gun; I don't think they were kidding that time." The thought of the Vietcong having a blonde American in a bikini, on water skis, as moving target to practice on is irresistible; she promises to make a date with me soon, so I can watch.

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Inevitably, the secretaries here are something of a special breed. They come from tours in Berlin, Burma, and the Congo; they don't look all that different, but they must be;

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they seem to have no trouble adapting to the peculiar trials of living in a bulls-eye.

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bull's-eye

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The girls on the bicycles wear ao-dais ("ow-zai"), loose silk pajama trousers with long panels of silk fluttering down front and back, tight bodices; the rear panel butterflies behind them as they pedal. The girls in the bars wear ao-dais or white nurses' uniforms. They say: "You Number 1. You buy me whicky . . . I love you too much." There are men who stand around and say, "You know, I don't think you see so many of them that are really beautiful." I think you do.

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Word from the provinces: a young provincial reporter for the Political Section, who speaks perfect Vietnamese, just escaped a mine this week; it was controlled by wire, and the VC set it off just too soon, stopping his jeep and spattering him with glass. The Province Rep in Han Nghia was missed for the fourth time last week, too; the jeep a hundred yards ahead of him was blown up by a mine. He has driven through three road ambushes, is sure he will leave this country alive. Others are not.

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1 line #

The wives are gone, but the cooks and maids remain, and the large high-ceilinged houses and apartments, so the men of the Mission entertain each other well, with Vietnamese or French or Chinese food, depending on the cook, and liquor from Hong Kong. The generals have mansions. At a promotion party for

two new brigadiers, I get out in a heavy rain and walk half a block, because the MP's won't let any taxis near; inside, a hundred men are drinking and eating hors d'oeuvres.

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A 1/m The incongruities

~~The incongruities~~ of Saigon extend to the provinces. Cruising down the Bassac in Chau Doc Province, a few kilometers from the Cambodian border, our little motor launch fifty yards offshore, we get the welcome of a ticker-tape parade. My arm grows tired from waving, but the reaction is intoxicating—the people act as if we were liberating them. Girls poling sampans grin at us, unable to wave back; old ladies bathing by the shore, fishermen in their boats or drying nets, all smile and wave; whole villages of children rush to the water to cheer "Hallo! Okay!" or run beside us along the path. I feel like a railroad engineer. And when we walk through the jungle to a training area, a few hundred yards from a riverside hamlet, a cloud of children tags along happily; but the soldier walking with me grows very agitated, tapping my carbine. Finally I understand, I have not put a loaded magazine in the weapon.

x

"Hallo! Okay!"

Later, sailing back along a different branch of the Bassac, the same head-turning appreciation from the villagers along the way. The villages all lie along a path, fifteen kilometers long, from An Phou to Chau Doc; it occurs to me that it would be uniquely pleasant to walk that path and gather all this welcome in

person, touch the children. "Can you walk along this path?" I ask the captain. "Well...with a squad, maybe."

① —The captain is running a special motivational training program for Popular Force troops, the forgotten men who guard the villages and take most of the casualties. The training uses Vietcong methods: all day and all evening the men sit in small seminarlike groups and discuss problems of their lives, of Vietnam, of their responsibilities to the people. The seminar leaders are dedicated, articulate; a third of them are Chieu Hoi *ralliés*, ex-Vietcong or Vietminh disillusioned with the party line but experts in this kind of discussion. In the evening I lie on the hard boards that serve as beds in our hut and listen to the seminar continuing, now among the cadre as they discuss the hard questions brought up during the day—the faults of Diem and the present régime, the worries about American presence, the reasons for correct behavior in the villages. I realize that what I am seeing in the candlelight is a Vietcong political discussion: the same faces (a third of them formerly VC), the same uniforms—peasant black pajamas—the same topics and self-criticism. It looks impressive—the faces are intent and alert, the discussion is animated and (translated for us) sharply focused—and it works; both sides, after all, are Vietnamese.

② —On a plane to the seacoast: the countryside from Saigon to Vung Tau is a multicolored landscape. All the similes it evokes are artistic; the Saigon River curves with the broad

swathes and sharp nodes of Miró figures, the flat, flooded ricefields stretch to the sea under a bland sky, all distant and flat and pretty as a Dali background (our helicopter is the fly in the foreground); the light shifts, the drenched land shimmers with the colors of an oil slick. VC land, all that.

Let's

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Jerry is dead. He died, I learn one noon, in an Air Vietnam crash on a flight inspecting refugee camps. Cause undetermined (still); not the VC, yet the suddenness of his death slaps my head like a rake handle. I didn't know him well yet, but I wanted to; I've been lucky so far, I've not had to get used to the deaths of friends.

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note

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—That night, a state dinner is called off and a group of us go to Arc-en-Ciel, a Chinese restaurant in Cholon. On the way two old-timers recall events in the buildings and streets we pass from '54, the days when Diem launched his campaign against the Binh Xuyen, the police gangsters who controlled opium, gambling, and vice in Cholon and the rest of Saigon; days when mortars and 105's were firing along these streets. As I turn to ask questions I'm tapped on the shoulder from the back seat: "Don't worry about talking now, you're sitting next to an open window . . . stay alert, keep your eyes outside. . . . I'm not kidding. The main thing is to be ready to jump out fast if you have to."

Inside the restaurant, the waiter seats us. "This is the same table

where I ate with Jerry, ²✓ 1 remark.
"Are you superstitious?" That notion hadn't occurred to me. I answer "No" automatically; but when we move to an adjoining room because of the noise I'm just as glad.

9 > 1.2# —As I read these notes over, I realize the prevalence of images of danger is only partly due to the fact of danger here: also, it is because this aspect of things strikes a newcomer most and because the death of Jerry —whom I had just met, and whom I wanted for a friend—suddenly organized around itself a scattered, ominous collection of impressions. But I'm hopeful, desperately glad to be here. I expect to work here a long time.